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and other poems



Amira El-Zein

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# The Jinn

and other poems


Amira El-Zein



The Jinn  
Amira El-Zein

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For my daughter, Kinda.

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## *The Jinn*

They come to me in tiny boats.  
They land quickly, their hands and feet dancing.  
They open my mouth, pour the elixir of eternity in.  
They line my hands with breezes, they whisper  
into my ears. I hear ecstatic horses neighing.  
They cook food for me in the oil of patience,  
my tongue tastes the salt of the ages.  
They stroke my fingers and turn my wedding ring  
seven times. High on a hill, a shepherd  
with his woolly herd waves to me. They come to me  
wearing horses' hooves, ready to jump over hurdles.  
The elders wheeze *ha ha ha* and tumble into the ancestors' well.  
They come to me riding on words that have lost  
their meanings. They wrap commas around their waists  
and rock. They come to me moaning *mmmm*,  
bleeding little dots of *o's* on the waters.  
They spy on my dreams, and then enter them.  
I hear a river running under my feet,  
I foresee the stories of the coming night.  
They steal my one secret and hang it high  
in a little bird's nest. My pores break open  
and algae bloom on my skin. They come to me,  
we go down together to the center of earth  
where volcanoes merge with green waters.  
When we return to the surface, the birds have lost  
their minds and drizzle soft feathers on our heads.  
They come to me and rain stops repeating itself,  
pulses beat a duet. They come to me unraveling  
the ropes of desire, desire flowing to a moon  
that melts in melodious chants. When they come,  
a red wolf blinks at me, we visit my grandmother  
together, and from her Beirut balcony we watch  
the passersby, we kindle a medieval lamp  
that sputters history, we whirl with the dervishes  
until dusk. They come to me, and throw fish bones  
into the water of life. Gravity overcomes me,



I fall downward into a deep pit, Death visits  
sweetly in the swelling circular forms of a pear.

I smell clay ready to be fired, to take human shape.  
I attend the gods' ceremony as they create a lotus  
out of the sleeping sea. I want to flee,  
but my bones crack, and Death comes for me.  
I am turning, turning into the silence,  
like a desert that knows nothing but itself.

*Translated by Gail Mazur with the author.*

## *I Hear My Ink Spill*

When the spirit called  
I descended,  
The light flickering,  
My oil-lamp dying,  
While a drumbeat  
Of emptiness rose  
Up the mountain

When the spirit called  
I descended  
The light flickering  
My path leading down until he came,  
The one who hurls bodies into the river,  
The thief of forms

When the spirit called  
I descended  
Toward shapes  
Of intact whiteness

When the spirit called  
I descended

Behind the gates of gold  
My shadow chanted:  
When the grain  
Separates from the husk,  
When the horizon's edge  
Skins the surface off the earth  
You will die

When the spirit called  
I descended

I neared the sacred tree,  
Where the sea gathers itself

Into grapevines  
And stone is pressed  
Into emerald

When the spirit called  
I descended  
Towards windmills  
That were turned  
By gusts of the dead

I descended  
And saw  
Every house on earth  
Has a double somewhere

Why Spirit did you call me?  
And why did I come?  
You who taught me  
How to empty  
My body of its blood,  
Let it flow like pure silk

When the Spirit called  
I descended  
To witness the rite  
Of washing the bodies  
I saw those who washed  
Thread a needle  
Through the vertebrae,  
Send golden nails  
Through every joint

Do not pull the rope tighter,  
O spirit,  
For I do not know my new name  
Do not draw near to me

For I do not know  
the color in which  
I might blossom

No one has ever  
Revealed the drawer  
Where they have hidden  
My memories,  
Or shown me how  
To find them.  
Ah I don't know  
How memory survives.  
Is it in the shape of a pill?  
Is it a liquid, a vapor?

Do not draw near to me,  
For I cannot read  
The sloped alphabet temple,  
And oh spirit  
I have never met with  
The priest meditating,  
Sitting like a lion

Here is my other,  
The I who awaits me  
By the gates of gold  
For a moment  
She practices  
My movements  
My walk  
The tone of my voice  
My cries

Spirit,  
For only an instant  
She mimes me

I the child, the mother, the spouse  
She awaits me  
At the gates of gold  
Holding a bouquet  
Of silvery roses

I know now  
How the chair takes the shape  
Of he who sits in it,  
And the river  
The form of  
A boat

O Spirit  
Why prepare  
The lotus coach  
By the gates of gold?  
Why send me messengers?  
Ah, I see them sweep  
The path before me  
With long robes of cinder

Spirit, I descend, as ever,  
Before the messengers  
Cover me with cinder,  
Before they drink  
from azure cups

And to the heavens  
Raise them

Spirit, do they call me?  
Do they chant my new name?  
Listen, Spirit,  
While I descend to those  
Who worship the poison spears,  
Who celebrate the rites of spears,



Who plunge them into smoke,  
And raise them to heaven  
To purify them. Ah why,  
Why do they ever forge them?

Spirit, is this why  
I forget  
How I walked  
How I thought?  
And oh what was my name?

Do they chant a new name for me?  
Or are these the laments  
Of drowned sailors?  
Spirit,  
Do they chant  
a new name for me?  
Or is this a dream  
of some other rites?  
Those of the fishermen  
Crowned with thorns  
Who sing my dreams  
At the gates of gold?

An other I  
Beckons to me

She smiles,  
And at the gates of gold  
She writes my poem  
And recites it to me:  
Now the grain separates  
From the husk  
Now the earth falls

Behind the gates of gold  
I see a house identical



To mine, its windows  
Buffeted by the winds  
Of my first life  
And I see myself  
As myself  
Writing this poem,  
My books dispersed  
Here and there in a room  
Identical to my room  
Ah, and I hear  
My ink  
Spill in regret  
Of my first life

*Translated by Fred Marchant with the author.*

## *The Returning Spirits*

We are the souls that keep coming back to the sound  
of something beating in the background  
Our *sheikh* is Time kicking a soccer ball around the backyard  
We are the silver tip of the blind man's cane  
advancing through the wide courtyard of dreams  
before his tapping fades

Who else could plunge  
into the naked sea at dusk, like drops  
of water sliding down a shower curtain?

We are the hunger of a whole nation  
that crystallizes in a crumb of morning toast  
at the corner of your open mouth—oh,  
you may think that morsel falls by itself,  
we snatch it away so lightly

And ever so lightly  
we fly away before the dust we stirred up  
has a chance to settle, and the swarm of ants arrives,  
ushering in the next famine

We are the hand that passes out the rich slices  
when you celebrate another invisible city  
carved up like a cake  
Before you can unseal the mouth of the jar  
we have already inhaled the stream of honey,  
and that state of intoxication is golden

We are that sense of recoil that tightens your gut  
when something you glimpsed in your childhood  
springs back unexpectedly, like a striped cat  
bounding into the neighbor's garden  
We are the current you swim through when you sleep,  
the hieroglyph you make when you stretch your limbs  
at dawn, and the horizon engulfs you  
We are the key that turns in the lock of your house,

that click you hear before you wake to find  
your deepest secret gone out  
stuffed in a doll no bigger than our little finger

We are that hum in your ear that always sounds  
the same: serene, a chant so distant  
you'll never get it out of your head

x We alone know that yellow flowers  
are the sun's messengers, gently alighting  
to teach you the alchemy of earth — *1. 2. 3. 4.*  
When the lemon is sliced in half we're the only ones  
that hear the bitter moaning as the fruit decomposes,  
facedown in a dish on the kitchen table  
x And do you know that under his bronze helmet  
the bee smiles as he sucks the blossom dry  
before he flies from the flowerbed—we do

We are that long line that forms at dusk  
along the horizon, when the galaxies gallop away  
like the wild animals they are Together we turn  
the sky's kaleidoscope until it fits your horoscope

We are the spirit of the thing that's shattered  
when you clap too loudly, the essence of the breath  
that pours away before you can cup your hand  
to someone's ear and whisper the impossible  
But when love emerges on a wave of sound  
we leap in ecstasy, borne up by the music we know  
will turn back to the hissing foam of static So sleep on  
in your heavy wool blankets, curled up like polar bears  
hibernating in snug hollows, we are that red flare  
of the fox's bushy tail and the shimmering fur  
of the wolf that darts behind your eyelids We  
are the white-hot bulb burning inside the projector

Pungent as the delicious aroma of your morning  
coffee, or the kiss on the cheek before  
you leave for work, we are the nimbus around

each precious moment, before that moment dissolves  
Later, as the slow cocoon of smoke from your cigarette  
rises over your rocking chair, and you stare at the ceiling  
as if your fate were eternal weariness—that's  
when we flutter across the border of your vision

And when we wrap your body with our misty scents,  
suddenly you withdraw in fear  
like humiliated beggars  
Generations of you were born too late  
Like autumn leaves turning in the wind before  
they fall to earth, you gaze at your empty hands,  
disconsolately, then drift away  
on a gust that stirs up the past of another life

That shadow you are born with we spread on the ground,  
like a blanket for the baby to play with his toys

When thirst turns your cup into a bottomless pit  
we are what swirls in the wine, the dervish of desire

Between you and us are glossy stones that horses vomit  
as they carry you on the bridges of pain Our procession  
is a gloss on yours, though we part at the river  
where a narrow footbridge suspends the rush of your lives  
Obscure as the flicker of illumination  
that allows us to linger in God's shadow  
we pinpoint the haze, and even

long after the sun has gone down, Dawn  
is still waiting for us in her secret chamber

When you try to explain the way things are  
we pay careful attention to your tongue's gyrations,  
waiting for the opening in the conversation  
when we can breathe something into your ear  
that sounds like the murmur of last night's dream  
And if your boisterous laughter steals over the room,  
we're the thief that carries it off



down the corridor We plant the seed of your joke  
in a flowerpot next door, and wait for the florid  
curse to blossom from your neighbor's mouth

Who else remembers how to stuff your pillows  
with just enough cotton to keep the elders  
turning over in their sleep, but not so much  
as to muffle the sobs of a child And when your mother  
wakes up coughing, wondering why her throat  
still gets so dry in the middle of the night, those same  
pillows will cradle her head when she lies back down

We are the doubts that flow through the cracks in your  
argument,  
the eyes that study you as they would a painting  
propped in a sitting room Even when your aura  
turns incandescent as the colors of a Persian carpet,  
we can hear your fights announcing the dawn, and louder  
than roosters the sound goes on forever  
We are the footnote that's never beneath your regard,  
the sober reminder that punctures the swelling image

Poetic images shift like thieves, forever trying  
to recite the Koran's opening chapter, while children play  
their jazz music So the mouth keeps blowing smoke  
until the cards are reshuffled in a Greek taverna

We are the martyr's blood that flows unstaunched  
over the city, bleeding through the clouds  
whenever the horizon unravels its layers of gauze  
and the sun shines like the countenance of a saint,  
or the gouged bark of an ancient tree  
bathed in the sap of its own precious ointment  
Though why the river's foam seems to drag behind  
the dark surge of its current, or the slender palm tree  
casts no shadow, are deepening shades of our mystery

Who knows what would fall from the overcast sky  
if we weren't attuned to the slightest discordance

when one kind of music eclipses another  
But should we engrave your fate on a walnut's husk,  
only the ants will be able to crack the code  
To stand at the very threshold of poetry's  
feverish pitch, as if you could hear the flapping  
of ethereal wings, on the verge of passing out  
as you enter the source of your native tongue,  
where the dialects are thick as jungle fronds  
And just before the sound of dull chanting resumes  
like drizzle on a sidewalk, note the sunflower's  
blazing mouth, and that foot-basin of rose-petals

What can't be seen is already stretching toward you,  
like a black cat on a ledge What makes you look up  
from the poem are paws scratching against the glass

What sounds like someone kicking a soccer ball  
around the backyard must be that sheikh

*Translated by George Kalogeris with the author.*



## *About Time*

✕ It's about time, time  
That we fish the sea for coral  
And our new form emerges

It's about time that we  
Kept pace with the speed of the pulse  
Throbbing at our wrists

Time that the breath like a gust  
Of our ancestors filled the room  
And soothed our burning cheeks

✕ And when the time comes  
That our grief is hung up to dry  
From the face of the cliff  
Shepherds will point out  
The trickling stream  
And drink in its meaning  
As they wonder: "Is it true  
That the time has come?"

And when the time comes, how  
Will we row across the flowers  
With only the wind for oars

✕ The jinn have been known to implore:  
"It's time you depart for the mountains  
Where villagers will provide  
Nothing but the pure snow  
Of happiness to cup in your palms—  
And before you can say, "Is it true  
The time is at hand?" alas, that  
Village has melted through your fingers

How, when it rains every day  
And our headstones darken the hour  
Will we stand at the brink, listening  
To the crackle of our recollections  
Heaped like brushwood for the fire  
Burning in the dusk behind us?

What hour of the day will it be  
When we enter the book, walking  
Toward what is not yet written  
As its pages unfurl  
Like the swell of parallel rivers  
Isolated in time by nothing  
But the narrow bank of the spine

✱ { The jinn have been known to say:  
"The time for leaving has arrived,  
Go in the sloping light  
That pours from Heaven's hillsides  
Rejoice like the limbs of the tree  
Triumphing over the storm!"

? { When will the softer hour strike  
That is now and forever heard  
As the muffled approach  
Of our mother, asking  
In a puzzled voice: "Who left  
This window open in the rain?"

From the rivulets of our palms  
Water runs between  
Two ablutions,  
And our polluted blood  
Seethes with a tropical fever  
When the eye becomes an island  
In the middle of the open sea

The jinn have been heard to say:  
"Join us in the forest, in the night  
Illuminated by nothing but the glow  
Of small moons whose beams will never  
Blind you when we flicker through  
The same trees of your dream!"

The hour will descend when we fall  
Asleep on our right sides, and emptiness  
Abandons everything it has to do  
With color—so I write  
While the pain is still ripe  
On our right sides, pressure  
Turning us towards the searing  
Sensation of the sun  
Entering the room where we lie  
Curled up in our second birth

We remember the furniture  
Our fathers threw away  
And how it piled up behind them

The pain on the right-hand side  
Remains in my right hand  
And the words themselves seem to ache  
In the same direction whenever I write  
"It's time!" The pain

Persists like waking up  
On the dark side of the bed  
Every day, until the family  
Finally disperses, again

Now the dead seal their doors  
While the living sit in porcelain jars  
Counting the days till a crack  
Appears, and the waters of death  
Darken like a strip of dyed cotton

In black letters I write  
"It's about time," and  
The calm that comes over my body  
Is how the dusk will descend  
As this song, next time

\* "The time will come for talk  
Intimate as the trees in the night  
Talking through their branches  
When we howl to each other like wolves 97. coo doves  
Straining our necks in the night air  
And that time will spring back  
Like a twig where the smaller birds  
Like to hop up and down  
One second at a time"

I listen to the jinn  
Singing of return, as if  
My lines were equations  
Corresponding to vectors of light  
Where the borders of our homeland  
Finally add up

While I was writing this poem  
A jinni opened the screen door  
Between two verses  
And another came after him  
Down that corridor that keeps  
Extending between the words  
"It's about" and "time"

I followed them to the mouth  
Of a grotto that was lit  
From somewhere behind this poem  
Where a white horse was drinking  
Ruffling the sheet of water  
As he whinnied through his nostrils  
And I saw the ripples of the current



Fold and unfold in lines of verse  
Turning back on themselves  
Until the image of the jinn  
Was mirrored in the very water  
He lapped with his tongue—  
And I drank it all in  
As if the pack of wolves  
Might scatter to the margins  
Of the white grotto in my poem

So I left the phrase "it is about"  
And left "time," until  
I couldn't hear myself think  
Then the doors of the sun  
Blazed open, and the earth  
Was already warm, and brick-red

*Translated by George Kalogeris with the author.*

### *Square is Jerusalem*

O dome,  
shrouding the bedouin  
fleeing,  
shaking dust from their souls,  
and like insects,  
taking wing.  
O night  
that transmutes bees into bats!

May the vault of the cosmos  
drop down;  
may the bell of the soul chime!  
Thus we proclaim  
the Resurrection!

The Resurrection!

Death is stroking shoulders,  
Death is hunching over,  
Death is stammering!

No daylight penetrates the night.  
No night penetrates the day.

Who is propagating  
camel upon camel  
in the desert?

Whose women are spreading  
in thick tresses;  
in madness?

Whose bones are glowing  
in the shadows,  
smoking blue fire?



No lambs fight wolves.

Bedouin of Hell  
worship women adorned  
with out torments.

Woe to Hell  
with its bedouin!

Woe to the Jinn  
chanting under my balcony,  
plunging down wells  
and lapping honey!

I say:  
"Square is Jerusalem;  
round is my soul for you!"

You say:  
"There's a bell chiming!  
Help, Help!

Do you hear the dead munching roots,  
their fingers twitching  
in their graves,  
towards the Lord?"

I say:  
"Do you hear  
my pulse  
in the nearby village?"

You say:  
"Oh!  
Fire is blazing  
in the horns of the mountain goats!"

You called me  
and I did not answer.  
I didn't!

I say :  
"Look!  
A bird splits the sky  
into you  
and I."

Two unattained longings are we.  
We die between  
two stairs;  
we sleep in  
a shattered jar.  
OH!  
Two unattained longings are we.

When shall we  
drift together  
like a wafting dune?  
Whisper like evil spirits  
in books?  
When shall we transmigrate  
row upon row?

Now the bedouin  
tear out their tongues!

Now the Jinn shake pain  
from their heels!

Let history  
come  
in robes of delirium!

Let the taverns of our ears  
ignite!

Let the peacocks of joy  
come

and enfold their heads  
with the carpets of their tails,  
chanting the Verses of Mercy,  
strutting proudly  
at dawn,  
our secrets tucked under their wings.

I say:  
"Square is Jerusalem;  
round is my soul for you!"

O two-horned one!  
What human horses chase you?

O two-horned one!  
Grant me resurrection  
without numbers,  
levels,  
or colors!

O two-horned one!  
Blessed is alchemy,  
the craft of kings  
that brings you back  
to me!

And curses,  
curses upon humans  
with hard hearts,  
who eat no bread  
nor plants.

See!  
This is my hand  
that throws holes  
of hearts!  
And this is wet sand  
in my hand.  
Is your death  
close,

O Love?  
See!  
In my hand is a fruit  
with no seed.  
Is your rebirth near,  
O Love?

Like a matchstick burns,  
thus bedouin bleed.  
They heel over  
like sailboats.  
They drown  
In the dark.

I say:  
"Square is Jerusalem;  
round is my soul for you!"

Whether in the East  
of matter  
or its West,  
it is you.  
In abodes of the gods,  
or human homes,  
it is you.  
And my voice is seeping,  
ant-like,  
through space,  
toward you.

Let warfare rage  
and the writings of nations  
be erased.

Footnote:  
"O Grandma,  
why do you weep  
before the Mediterranean reed  
and chant:

'If you see the funeral cortege,  
arise!'  
Let me be!

I shall bring along my garden's trees,  
my table and my chair.  
And from my grave,  
each morning shall I rise,  
water my trees,  
write my words,  
and say my prayer."

*Translated by Karin C. Ryding with the author.*



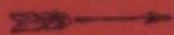




**Amira EL-Zein** is a published poet in Arabic and in French with two collections of poetry: *The Book of Palm Trees* and *Bedouins of Hell*. Her translation of the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish's book, *Unfortunately It Was Paradise*, was a finalist for the PEN International Prize for translation in 2004. She has published and lectured extensively in Arabic, French, and English on topics ranging from medieval and modern Arabic thought, to Francophone literature, to comparative mysticism, and comparative folklore. She has a forthcoming book: *Jinn Among Humans in Classical Islam: The Hidden & the Manifest*, which will be published by Syracuse University Press. She is currently the director of the Arabic Program at Tufts University where she teaches courses on Arabic literature and culture.



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